

# Tangaroa in the Inscription of the Chicago Fish Tablet

Sergei V. Rjabchikov

According to the beliefs of the ancient Easter Islanders, the main god, Makemake, made the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars. He also was the creator of mankind (Métraux 1940:312, 314). Birdmen figures were features of the cult; frequently these are represented in the local rock art (Métraux 1940:314; Lee 1992:15, 22 ff), but it is also known that this mysterious deity was the great spirit of the sea (Thomson 1891:482). The god Tangaroa appeared at Easter Island incarnated in a seal, and his *mana*, supernatural power, was over the sea (Métraux 1940:310). These items state that Makemake is the Polynesian god Tangaroa, the Lord of the Ocean. Polynesian myths tell that, in the beginning, this god sat in a shell named Rumia, and then he went out of this small space and created the Universe (Buck 1938:69). The same story is presented in a *kai kai* chant (the text per Barthel 1962:848 and the translation per Rjabchikov 1995a:39):

<i>E poie nuinui a tuki e</i>	The Great Dawn <sup>1</sup> —the Creator [lit. the Copulation] (dwelt)
<i>imua ia koe taau taau</i>	in the Darkness <i>Kore</i> in the beginning for countless ages.
<i>hatupaki hatupaki</i>	The Lord—the Shark (Seal); The Lord—the Shark (Seal).
<i>e kahi e</i>	Oh, the Tunny! <sup>2</sup>



Figure 1. The Chicago Fish Tablet.

The inscribed fish tablet is housed in the Field Museum, Chicago; its text is presented in Figure 1. The sign of birdman is engraved on the head of this tablet, so it is natural to suggest that the hieroglyphic inscription is connected to the god Makemake. The glyph 167 “hammer-headed shark” omitted on the standard tablets is represented in Figure 2. The record according to my decipherment of the script (Rjabchikov 1987a:362-3; 1994a:3; 1994b:8; 1995b:4; 1995c:5) is as follows:

6-4-24 119 24 81-81 11 4-6 5 6	<i>A atua ai Kupenga-Ai-Manumanu. Pakia tuhatuha.</i>
25 22/64 16 44 146 12 2	<i>Hua-Rapa-Mea Kahi-Taha.</i> “The new moon”, <i>IKA</i> (determinative) — <i>Hina</i> .
6 24 19-11 24 167 19-11	<i>A ai Kie-Pakia, ai</i> “Hammer-headed shark”— <i>Kie-Pakia</i> .

The combination of the three glyphs — 6-4-24 *a atua ai* ‘the god (the location)’ — sometimes introduces a deity’s name or a place-name where this deity dwelt (Rjabchikov 1987b:3; 1994a: 23); moreover, this marker precedes a deity’s name on the Tahiti fish tablet (Rjabchikov 1996a:38). The next words, 119 24 81-81, *Kupenga-Ai-Manumanu* ‘The Net-the Copulation-the Bird’, are similar to the Rapanui



Figure 2. Glyph 167 “hammer head shark.”

place-names *Punu a kupenga a poie* ‘To hatch out-the Net-the Dawn’ and *Kahi here ama* ‘The Tunny-the Flower/Child/Net-the Clear Sky’<sup>3</sup>. Besides, the names *Punu* and *Makemake* are interchangeable in the similar songs (Barthel 1962:850). Thus I conclude that *Kupenga-Ai-Manumanu* is another name of Tangaroa (Makemake). *Mea Kahi* ‘The Creator-the Tunny’<sup>4</sup> was the god of fishermen (Thomson 1891:533), and this name is an epithet of Tangaroa (Fedorova 1978:23, 356). A Rapanui legend (Métraux 1937:46) tells of Tangaroa and his brother who caught fish in a net. Interestingly, fish is a symbol of the god Tangaroa in the Maori mythology (Buck 1966:439). The Easter Islanders used the term *Mea Ika* (*Mea Kahi*) for the designation of the fish (tunny) god (Thomson 1891: 537). One such image (Thomson 1891:Plate LI, Figure 4) contains the glyphs 64 *Mea* and 41 (*h*)ere. In addition, a fish stone figurine contains the fish (tunny) glyph (Mellén Blanco 1986/1987:275).

The next words of the record, 11 4-6 5 6, *Pakia tuhatuha* ‘the time of Shark (Seal)’ describe the month’s name *Tangaroa-uri* ‘Tangaroa-progeny’<sup>5</sup> (October) when fishing was no longer prohibited.

The words, 25 22/64 16 44, *Hua-Rapa-Mea Kahi-Taha* ‘The Fruit-Shine-Mea Kahi-Frigate Bird’ are an integral characteristic of the solar god-creator Makemake.

The words, 146 12 2, “The new moon”, *IKA* (determinative) — *Hina* ‘The new moon, the constellation of the month *Tangaroa-uri*’<sup>6</sup> repeat the idea about the beginning of this month.

The words, 6 24 19-11 24 167 19-11, *A ai Kie-Pakia, ai* ‘Hammer-headed shark’-*Kie-Pakia* ‘The place ‘Bright Red — Shark], the place ‘Hammer-headed shark—Bright Red—Shark’ can describe one of the places associated with the god Tangaroa (Rjabchikov 1996b:257).

L. M. Ermakova, in co-operation with Ü. Sirk, have distinguished some Austronesian elements in archaic Japanese poetry and religion (Ermakova 1995:144-8; 166); the interpretation of these data was made by the author (Rjabchikov 1996a:15-6). This notice is a continuation of the research of the Japanese-Rapanui parallels. In a Japanese record of ancient matters, *Nihon syoki* (Ermakova and Meshcheryakov,

1997:182-3; 431) there is a strange passage: a whale having the obscure epithet *isukupasi* is situated on a high hill. The term *isukupasi* can be split into two words *isuku* (cf. Rapanui *hiku* 'caudal fin'; or *isuku* is equal to *isu-ku*, *i-suku*, *i-su-ku*) and *pasi* (cf. Rapanui *paki(a)* 'shark; seal'), and the idea 'above' is connected with the rising sun in eastern Polynesian religion (Barthel 1978:36).

On the other hand, the Austronesian tribe of fishermen of archaic Japan worshipped the sea god *Vatatumi-no kami* (Ermakova and Meshcheryakov 1994:137-8); and this name consists, in particular, of the words *vata* (cf. Maori *whata* 'to elevate', Rapanui *hata* 'to elevate' in *rongorongo* and place-names) and *tuumi* (cf. Samoan *tumutumu* 'top; peak, height, zenith'). In Polynesian beliefs *Tumu* is a specific name of Tangaroa (lit. 'The Big Man')<sup>7</sup>, compare P.H. Buck's (1938:69) remark that once this deity breathed into the rock foundation the essence of himself and personified it as *Tumu-nui* to be the husband. *Tumu-nui* or The Great Source describes the origin of the nature in Tuamotuan mythology (Buck 1938:187). Thus archaic Japanese religion included some features that correlate with those of Polynesia.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Makemake is the sun god: cf. Rarotongan *makemake* 'light' (Fedorova 1978:20); Tangaroa is a symbol of the sun both in the western Polynesian mythology (Polinskaya 1986:131) and in the Rapanui folklore text "*Apar*" (Rjabchikov 1996a:6).

<sup>2</sup>The tunny is an incarnation of Tangaroa (Fedorova 1978:24).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Rapanui *amo* 'to clear up (about the sky)', Japanese *ama* 'sky'.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Rapanui *mea* 'red', Samoan *mea* 'genitals'.

<sup>5</sup>The Small Santiago Tablet (Gr 2) contains the following record which is presented in the beginning of a genealogy characterized by occurrences of the word 48-15' *uri* 'son': 12 11 72 48-15 16 *Hika poki manu uri Kahi*, i.e. 'Rongo, the son of Tangaroa'. I took into account that it is well known such beginning of the genealogy: Tangaroa (*Ariki*) as a father, and Rongo (*Rongo-Rongo-a-Tangaroa*) as his son (Métreaux 1940:127). The site Orongo named for the god Rongo (Fedorova 1977:59) was the place where puberty rites were performed in December (month *Koro*) and were associated with the solstice (Métreaux 1940:105-6). Cf. Maori *hi-kahika* 'ceremony performed over a new-born child', Rapanui *poki manu* 'puberty rites' [*poki* 'child', *manu* 'bird'], Maori *uri* 'progeny; offspring'.

<sup>6</sup>See Rjabchikov 1993a:5; 1993b:23.

<sup>7</sup>I. K. Fedorova (1978: 339) has translated the name Tangaroa (in form of *Tanga Roa*) as 'The Large Fellow'.

#### REFERENCES

- Barthel, T. S. 1962. Rezitationen von der Osterinsel. *Anthropos*, 55: 841-59.
- Barthel, T. S. 1978. *The Eighth Land*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Buck, P. H. (Te Rangi Hiroa). 1938. *Vikings of the Sunrise*. New York: J.B. Lippincott Company.
- Buck, P. H. (Te Rangi Hiroa). 1966. *The Coming of the Maori*. Wellington: Maori Purposes Fund Board, Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd.
- Ermakova, L. M. 1995. *Rech'i bogov i pesni lyudey*. Moscow: Vostochnaya literatura.
- Ermakova, L. M. and A. N. Meshcheryakov, 1994. *Kojiki — Zapisi o deyaniyakh drevnosti: Svitki 2-y i 3-y*. St. Petersburg: Shar.
- Ermakova, L. M. and A. N. Meshcheryakov. 1997. *Nihon syoki. Analiz Yaponii*. Vol. 1. St. Petersburg: Giperion.

- Fedorova, I. K., 1977. Novye dannye o mifologii ostrova Paskhi. In: B.N. Putilov (ed.) *Fol'klor i etnografiya. Svyazi fol'klora s drevnimi predstavleniyami i obryadami*. Leningrad: Nauka, pp. 52-63.
- Fedorova, I. K. 1978. *Mify, predaniya i legendy ostrova Paskhi*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Lee, G. 1992. *The Rock Art of Easter Island. Symbols of Power, Prayers to the Gods*. Los Angeles: The Institute of Archaeology.
- Mellén Blanco, F. 1986/1987. Una *Ma'ea ika* de la isla de Pascua. *ARS Praehistorica*, V/VI: 273-6.
- Métreaux, A. 1937. The Kings of Easter Island. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 46: 41-62.
- Métreaux, A. 1940. Ethnology of Easter Island. *Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 160*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Polinskaya, M.S. 1986. *Mify, predaniya i skazki Zapadnoy Polinezii: ostrova Samoa, Tonga, Niue i Rotuma*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Rjabchikov, S.V. 1987a. Progress Report on the Decipherment of the Easter Island Writing System. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 96:361-7.
- 1987b. Religious Records in the Easter Island Tablets. *Rapa Nui Notes*, 5: 2-3.
- 1993a. *Tayny ostrova Paskhi*. Vol. 2. Krasnodar: Severnyy Kavkaz.
- 1993b. Notes on the Easter Island Script. *L'Écho de Rapa Nui*, 24: 22-3.
- 1994a. *Tayny ostrova Paskhi*. Vol. 3. Krasnodar: Ecoinvest.
- 1994b. Notes on the Easter Island Script (Part II). *L'Écho de Rapa Nui*, 26: 7-8.
- 1995a. *Tayny ostrova Paskhi*. Vol. 4. Krasnodar: Ecoinvest.
- 1995b. Notes on the Easter Island Script (Part III). *L'Écho de Rapa Nui*, 29: 4.
- 1995c. Notes on the Easter Island Script (Part IV). *L'Écho de Rapa Nui*, 32: 4-5.
- 1996a. *Tayny ostrova Paskhi*. Vol. 5. Krasnodar: Torgovopromyshlennaya palata Krasnodarskogo kraya.
- 1996b. Easter Island Place-Names: Myths and Reality. *Beiträge zur Namenforschung. Neue Folge*, 31: 255-9.
- Thomson, W. J. 1891. Te Pito te Henua, or Easter Island. Report of the United States National Museum for the Year Ending June 30, 1889. *Annual Reports of the Smithsonian Institution for 1889*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, pp. 447-552.

### Millennium trip to Rapa Nui!

Celebrate the millennium on your favorite island at the Center of the World

A special Easter Island tour is scheduled from December 30 to January 7, led by Dr Georgia Lee. Tour is limited to 15 persons. An optional tour to Northern Chile follows the Easter Island segment.

### Marquesan Islands Tour!

See the exotic Marquesan Islands with Sidsel Millerstrom, UC Berkeley Ph.D. candidate. This nine-day tour includes one week on a private catamaran. Explore fabled ruins and exotic forests on Eiao, Ua Huka, Nuku Hiva and Hiva Oa. Tour limited to 10 participants. January 14-23, 2000.

For information contact: Far Horizons Archaeological and Cultural Tours, Inc., phone (800) 552-45750; fax (505) 343-8076.